The Sabal Report

Public Engagement during a Pandemic (and Beyond)

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If my own experience is representative of planners nationwide, your inbox has been full of webinar opportunities to learn about how to re-think engagement under social distancing measures. On the one hand, technology provides a plethora of tools that have the potential to *increase* engagement from cohorts of the population that are typically not represented at in-person public meetings. On the other hand, full reliance on virtual engagement will potentially leave out a cohort that is accustomed to showing up in-person to not only share comment, but to establish a presence as well.

This is also a Census year, and a major election year, and – oh yeah – we are in the middle of a pandemic. What can we expect from public participation in planning processes amid all of this? It is tempting to believe that we can expect more involvement because we see images of people bored and stuck in their homes – and everyone is online. But still a large segment of our population does not have access to Wi-Fi or computer, especially in the rural parts of our state. And the chronically underrepresented in our public engagement forums – whether in person or virtual – are the same people who are most likely bearing the brunt of the current crisis, and therefore may be less inclined to participate in planning processes when their livelihoods and health are at stake.

The City of Charleston is scheduled to rewrite its Comprehensive Plan this year and given the critical element of public engagement in this process, we are weighing the pros and cons of moving forward with only virtual tools at our disposal for the foreseeable future. To help us in these deliberations, I reached out to other jurisdictions to see how they were responding. I asked the following questions:

1. How are you convening your Planning Commission – given challenges with hosting public hearings virtually?
2. Are you achieving strong, diverse, and meaningful participation from the public in the process?
3. How do participation numbers and demographics compare with in-person engagement?
4. What tools have been most successful and less successful?
5. Does anyone have feedback about virtual engagement and legal implications?

I received responses from a combination of cities, counties, private engagement firms, and regional and transportation planning agencies. A big thank you to everyone who shared insight and resources. In return, I have summarized highlights and takeaways from responses below.

To hold virtual public hearings, or not?

Everyone that responded is either already holding public hearings virtually or are currently considering if and how to do so. Or, they are holding public hearings only for certain boards or items – such as the Comprehensive Plan – while postponing others. MASC has issued guidelines for virtual public hearings. Regarding comprehensive planning during COVID-19, here are three South Carolina cities that have shifted their planning process online.

Goose Creek
Greenville
Harleyville

Each day new information and insights into the disease and its impacts are revealed, making it difficult for anyone to anticipate what we can expect by summer, fall, or even winter. Decision-makers are asking: What might be the consequences – social, economic, legal – if public hearings remain indefinitely on hold versus if public hearings continue virtually? There will be consequences either way. The choice comes down to which consequences are less severe or which can be more easily mitigated. We are all having to adjust our expectations and re-think what is possible, permissible, and ultimately, what is normal.

Zoom, Zoom, Zoom, WebEx?

Central to the decision for how to conduct virtual meetings is which platform to use. You have likely already heard of Zoom. Other popular platforms are GoToWebinar (a.k.a. GoToMeeting) and WebEx. The main determining factors for which tool is most appropriate for public meetings have been:

- Security risks (the main reason why many have chosen not to use Zoom)
- Technical capacity of remote staff and board members
- Extent of control over public participation (audio, video, and use of chat function)
- Participation options for public (listen only, call-in, moderated Q&A window)
- Expense

The challenge has been that no single tool meets all of these needs adequately. The best solution is to marry the best fit with a combination of other tools and strategies to ensure that the meetings not only meet the letter of the law, but also spirit of the law, in terms of public notice and input.

Regardless of which platform your IT and procurement staff support, here are some pro tips shared for holding virtual meetings:

- Consult your legal team regarding any virtual meeting strategy your agency pursues.
- Practice makes perfect. Practice running your meetings before the real thing as many times as it takes. Run through different scenarios and bring in staff to act out the various roles.

- Maximize accessibility by streaming your meeting on YouTube and/or Facebook. A lot of places have already been doing this for years, and it makes it easier for people to stay informed even if they cannot drive to City Hall in rush hour traffic on a weekday afternoon. (Consider continuing this practice post-COVID-19).

Of those South Carolina jurisdictions that have already transitioned to virtual public hearings, they have offered several options for the public to provide input. Make sure instructions for how to provide input are stated clearly in as many places and on as many communication channels as you have available to you. Examples of public input options include:

- Submit written comment within a certain timeframe prior to the meeting
- Join the virtual meeting with video and two-way audio capabilities, upon request only
- Request to be called in by phone during the meeting
- Provide comment in person from a designated location, with appropriate safety and social distancing measures in place

Quality and representation of public engagement

For those jurisdictions and agencies that are experimenting with virtual engagement for the first time, it is too soon to know how their participation numbers and demographics compare with in-person events. However, jurisdictions and agencies that have been deploying virtual strategies and tools long before COVID-19 have demonstrated that a robust online presence can go a long way and can result in a much more diverse and inclusive engagement process.

The lesson here applies to engagement beyond COVID-19. Neither in-person nor virtual is inherently more or less accessible. There are multiple strategies both in-person and virtual that are accessible to different cohorts of the population. You need a combination of strategies to achieve strong, diverse, and meaningful participation from the public. If you only have one or two tricks, you will always only reach a certain demographic. The most successful engagement strategies have been multi-faceted.

There are countless online platforms that specialize in public engagement (and they are probably flooding your inbox right now), but here are some other tools to consider adding to your engagement toolkit during social distancing, as well as for the long-term:

- Social media with targeted ads
- E-newsletter with list-building capabilities (ex: Mailchimp)
- Pre-recorded videos and presentations
- Online surveys, forums, and discussion boards
- Interactive maps and map-based web applications (ex: ArcGIS StoryMap)
- TV broadcast
- Text messaging (yes there are tools that can gather input via text messages)
- Phone tree campaigns and telethons

- Partnering with other departments and agencies to get the word out (e.g. traffic signs, delivery of info slips via garbage service)
- Flyer distribution in neighborhoods and essential businesses that are still open

A new and improved normal: let's raise the bar for public engagement beyond COVID-19

Regardless of where your jurisdiction falls on this spectrum, this situation has pushed the fundamental nature of public participation in the planning process to the forefront of everyone's minds.

Whether you are embarking on an update to your comprehensive plan, like we are at the City of Charleston, seeking public comment for a proposed road project, or just trying to keep the wheels of development moving forward, there is a legal and ethical mandate for the public to have an opportunity to offer scrutiny and provide input.

One of the most common concerns shared regarding virtual engagement was about accessibility, and yet we know accessibility has been an issue long before COVID-19. Yes, it is true that there are many people who either do not have access to the necessary technology or will have trouble navigating the technology to participate in the way that the law intends. This challenge is being taken very seriously and both elected officials, board members, and staff are making every attempt to ensure accessibility with virtual meetings.

I hope this same consideration will be given to accessibility after in-person meetings are safe to resume. There are many people who physically cannot access in-person meetings due to work hours, reliance on a transit system that cannot get them from work to a meeting on time, single parents who do not have childcare options, and non-English speakers. Furthermore, the traditional information channels that inform the public about when meetings are happening, what they are about, and why it concerns them is just as challenging to navigate for the average layperson; as it is for well-versed individual to navigate new technology. On the other side of this crisis, I urge planners to still ask the question: Whom are we leaving out with our current methods? What else can we be doing or do differently to ensure everyone has equal opportunity to participate?

Below are some resources as you consider how to build out your engagement toolkit now and going forward.

[APA's Online Engagement Collection (login required)](#)

[Moving Planning Commission Meetings Online During COVID-19](#)

[Planning and Promoting your Engagement Process, Planetizen Course](#)

[Community Engagement Toolkit prepared by the City of Kalamazoo](#)

[Cities of Service Citizen Engagement Techniques](#)

[National Civic League COVID-19 Resources for Individuals and Governments](#)

["Make Public Hearings More Public" – Strong Towns](#)

["Who Participates in Local Government?" – Evidence from Meeting Minutes](#)